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Global Professional Higher Education Learning Outcome Frameworks: A Cross-Case Qualitative Study with Tourism Management Education as an Exemplary Case

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Abstract: Twelve universities from five different higher education systems in China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore were selected as research objects for a cross-case qualitative study on the framework of undergraduate learning outcomes in tourism management. Although it belongs to a specific field, this study also faces two major problems in modern professional higher education worldwide: the ongoing tension between broad liberal arts education and specialized vocational training, and the competition between local cultural relevance and global standardization. Tourism management provides a typical case for observing the above conflicts because it is both an exceptionally open sector in terms of international integration and, at the same time, one of the most deeply rooted cultural spaces. Based on an all-around analysis of the programme profile, curriculum documents and official learning outcome statements, its core consistencies and differences with the talent cultivation objectives and curriculum systems at all levels were identified. Therefore, the shallow differences in curriculum design stem from deep-seated educational philosophies passed down through history, such as the goals of higher education and the role of universities in society. By treating tourism management as a representative case, this inquiry can expand the theoretical scope of the philosophical foundation for professional higher education and provide practical references for cross-disciplinary internationalisation and reform of curricula.

Keywords: Professional Higher Education; Learning Outcome Frameworks; Cross-Case Qualitative Analysis; Liberal-Vocational Divide; Globalization and Localization; Educational Philosophy; Comparative Higher Education

1. Introduction

Internationalisation of higher education has created a long-standing problem for professional programmes around the world. The transnational labour market, multinational enterprises and global accreditation agencies are all demanding curriculum standardisation and the production of graduates with transferable abilities. At the same time, universities should remain connected to the national cultural context and help stimulate the economy of their localities by safeguarding cultural heritage and nurturing engaged citizens. In addition, there is a deep-seated debate globally over the main purpose of higher education: should the professional curriculum focus on all-round intellectual cultivation that enables lifelong learning and civic participation for students, or should it prioritise the acquisition of industry-specific technical skills to help graduates find jobs quickly after graduation? Dewey raised these problems about education nearly a hundred years ago [1], and they are still relevant today.

These talks also cross over. At the base of the problem of how to connect theoretical knowledge with practical skills, all areas have encountered this issue; thus, curriculum construction, institutional management, and

educational policies around the world have been affected [2, 3]. Recently, comparison studies have shown that the liberal-vocational division manifests differently in various countries due to their own historical backgrounds in governance and education systems [4]. Tension exists in tourism management education because it is at the intersection of many academic traditions and is highly vulnerable to changes in the global market. With the world tourism industry expanding rapidly to account for more than 10% of the total GDP and employment globally, professionals skilled in navigating local cultural differences and international business practices are increasingly in demand. Tourism management education has thus attracted the attention of curriculum developers and policy-makers around the world. Despite the spread of tourism programmes, there is still a large difference in the goals of education and the content of courses offered.

All of the above reasons are related to differing philosophies on the quality of vocational education. Tourism management education in China has grown rapidly over the past two decades and is no longer a minor vocational specialisation; now, more than a thousand institutions across the country offer various courses. Chinese universities have traditionally emphasized all-encompassing theoretical foundations and general education, in line with Confucian educational ideals and the nation's human resource strategy [5,6]. Conversely, Western universities have taken various models, such as liberal arts-integrated systems and highly vocational ones that emphasise immediate employability [7,8]. Many questions about the future of tourism also stem from this; for example, what are the main similarities and differences in the objectives of talent cultivation and curriculum construction for institutions around the world? Which underlying educational philosophies do these variations reflect? How to have a professional programme that meets the competing demands of liberal and vocational education, as well as local and global orientation?

To explore the above issues, this study adopts a cross-case qualitative design and selects twelve universities purposefully from five countries with different higher education systems: China's state-directed model, the market-oriented systems of the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia, and Singapore's hybrid system that combines features of both. Inquiries focus on publicly available programme documentation, such as official learning outcomes, programme descriptions, course lists and handbooks. Systematically compare the above materials to present a detailed profile of how professional education is conceived and implemented in different institutions and cultures in this study. Tourism management provides empirical support for these results and can also offer new ideas for shaping the philosophical foundation of professional higher education and revising curricula elsewhere.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Liberal-Vocational Dichotomy in Professional Education

Liberal-vocational tension is one of the long-standing and controversial legacies of higher education. As Dewey put forward in *Democracy and Education*, for a long time, colleges and universities have been divided into two camps based on different philosophical stances: the epistemological school believes that knowledge has inherent worth and seeks to promote thinking by itself, while the political school regards knowledge as merely a tool to achieve economic and social development goals [1]. Since the 19th century, this division has altered the course of development for professional education by adding vocational courses to the traditional liberal arts system at universities [9].

Recently, many scholars have been doing so. Biesta [10,11] believes that the liberal-vocational division is not an "either-or" situation but a continuum, and good vocational education should integrate qualifications, socialisation and subjectification simultaneously. Wheelahan [12] proposed that the foundation of the vocational and professional curriculum should be a strong system of disciplinary knowledge to help students adapt to changes in work. Barnett [13] proposed a combined model of liberal arts and vocational education to cultivate both practical abilities and all-round intelligence in professional education, such as critical thinking, morality, communication skills, etc. Building such a hybrid model has been difficult; at the same time, universities are under pressure from multiple sides to change [14].

Recently, some studies have shown how this conflict occurs in practice. Research on engineering education documents faculty efforts to reconcile broad intellectual cultivation with specialisation in vocational training in curriculum design and teaching. Crawley and his colleagues have proposed a typical CDIO (Conceive-Design-Implement-Operate) system to ensure that new engineering curricula provide students with both strong foundations in science

and practical skills required by enterprises [15]. Frenk and his colleagues have proposed that medical education reform is inherently political; therefore, governmental support will be needed to adjust the curriculum to promote the all-round development of biomedical skills and social responsibility [16]. The above studies have shown that more cross-national and interdisciplinary qualitative research is needed to explore how different institutional and cultural contexts affect the liberal-vocational tension.

2.2. Globalization, Localization and Glocalization in Higher Education

The second large thread in higher education scholarship is the globalisation-localisation nexus. The internationalisation of higher education has developed globalised markets for education and spread foreign quality assurance systems [17]. Therefore, the university has increased the scope of study and incorporated many international studies into the curriculum. However, critics believe that too much standardisation may lead to a loss of local cultural identity and knowledge systems [18].

Robertson's idea of "glocalization" has been proposed to explore how the world of higher education combines global trends with local conditions dynamically [19,20]. Glocalisation refers to the iterative process of adapting, reinterpreting and hybridising global ideas and practices in local contexts to create institutional forms that are neither purely global nor purely local [21]. A system for teaching and learning has been designed based on the above framework. Recently, scholars have used glocalisation analysis on a particular institutional environment. Miani employed glocalization to explore transnational education in China and investigated how Sino-foreign cooperative universities reconcile the global educational model with local regulatory systems [22,23]. However, research abroad has also shown how glocalisation occurs in some professional areas closely linked to the global market.

Zahid and Neary investigated the glocalisation of curriculum internationalisation by comparing faculty perceptions in Pakistan and the United Kingdom [24]. According to the above results, foreignisation strategies are in line with the global trend but also influenced by local institutions and faculty experience. Tight has also studied globalisation outside the West and proposed that the role of local knowledge systems and culture in altering global norms is worth investigating [25]. The process of internationalisation in higher education across East Asia also shows the interplay of regional and national demands and global forces. The above studies show that glocalisation is not top-down imposition but bottom-up negotiation. Few scholars have extended this analysis to compare glocalization processes in multiple national higher education systems simultaneously.

2.3. Tourism Management Education: Existing Research and Its Deficiencies

Tourism Management Education Research has followed several paths. The first is curriculum content analysis to identify the main knowledge areas in hospitality operations, destination management, marketing and sustainable tourism [26,27]. Another study on skill mismatches between graduate abilities and industry demands frequently finds deficiencies in soft skills, critical thinking and cross-cultural communication [28]. Although these studies have provided some practical references for the problems in tourism education, they have largely failed to address the fundamental educational concepts underlying curriculum design. Recently, scholars have studied how Industry 4.0 technology is changing tourism education and proposed that new curricula need to integrate technical skills with higher-order thinking abilities [29].

Research on Internships in Tourism and Hospitality Education has been gradually introduced. Research on the impact of internships on competency development has introduced competency-oriented systems for cognition, character, and career skills [30,31]. Based on the above empirical evidence, internships can help hospitality students develop soft skills such as communication and organisation, and their design should be in line with the goals of teaching [32]. Cross-national comparisons of internship models and their integration into tourism curricula are also unavailable.

Comparative tourism education research has also expanded. Wang compared the tourism curricula of China and Australia and pointed out shortcomings in both places [33]. TedQual is another foreign accreditation institution that has promoted the standardisation of cross-border curricula [34]. A systematic review of undergraduate hotel management education research based on the SSCI database identified four main areas: teaching and learning methods, internships, students' abilities, and students' careers; the literature generally suggests that curricula should integrate all-round knowledge construction with advanced skill cultivation [35]. Although the above studies have identified some differences among the countries, they have generally only presented descriptive comparisons

or quantitative rankings and have failed to investigate how learning outcome frameworks are constructed or what philosophical assumptions they implicitly contain.

Most of the existing comparative studies share a defect: they only present information about the differences without systematically exploring the reasons for these differences. Wang compares China and Australia to show differences in the quantity of courses and intensity of practical training, but does not investigate the educational philosophies or institutional logics that lead to these differences [33]. Similarly, studies on UNWTO.TedQual certification have generally focused on whether the programs meet accreditation standards rather than on how different educational traditions interpret and apply those standards [34]. Descriptive studies have not provided theoretical support for other research and have failed to address the deep-seated philosophical causes of changes in school curricula. Given the above shortcomings, this paper will now explore the philosophical origins of the disparity in observation.

Recently, some scholars have begun to address these problems. All-encompassing research on instructional strategies in tourism and hospitality education has found that experiential learning, problem-based learning and authentic learning are now mainstream pedagogical modes, but evaluations still tend to focus on students' responses rather than changes in ability [36]. Research on the alignment of tourism management curricula with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals has found that different institutions have varied degrees of integration; often, sustainability literacy is taught superficially [37]. The International Handbook of Skill, Education, Learning and Research Development in Tourism and Hospitality has outlined new trends around the world, and how programmes are addressing the conflict between employability-oriented skill cultivation and other educational goals has been documented [38]. Generative artificial intelligence is also beginning to appear as a new round of disruption in tourism and hospitality education, and new problems have arisen in defining and assessing competence [39].

2.4. Research Gap and Contribution

Although there are many studies on general higher education and tourism management education, a deficiency remains. Few studies have systematically examined how the general tensions between liberal and vocational education, as well as the division between global and local orientation, are expressed in specific professional disciplines through a cross-case qualitative method. Most existing research on comparative tourism education remains within its own field and has not connected these results to broader discussions in higher education, limiting its application for general education scholars and policymakers.

Given this deficiency, a cross-case qualitative study has been conducted to explore the educational reasons behind the design of these programmes in more depth. Given the general conditions of professional higher education, the problems faced by tourism educationists are also reflective of problems at the global level of higher education. The results have provided some support for tourism education research and offered some reference points for the development of professional education in other fields. Thus, this study responds to the demand for more cross-disciplinary and comparative qualitative research that explores the basic problems of higher education in the era of globalisation [40,41].

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Design

A qualitative cross-case analysis design will be used to explore patterns and differences among various cases in this study while retaining the richness of each case. Cross-case analysis can offer a general theoretical basis by studying multiple cases simultaneously [42]. Given that the research questions involve comparing talent development goals and course structures in many universities and countries, this approach can conduct organised but context-aware comparisons.

Following Yin's replication logic [43], each case in the study is treated as an independent experiment to verify or refute the proposed theory. Thus, a method for discovery can be used to develop new knowledge bases instead of verifying these hypotheses. Select representative cases from various institutions and countries to find both general patterns and specific differences in learning outcome frameworks in the study.

3.2. Case Selection

A stratified purposive sampling strategy was used to select universities with well-known strengths in tourism management education. Purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research to select information-rich cases that can provide deep insights into the research questions [44]. The Selection Criteria Included:

Academic Reputation: Listed in the top 200 of the relevant subject area by QS World University Rankings, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), or Chinese Subject Rankings. Thus, the selected programmes represented high-quality tourism management education abroad.

Document availability: Availability of full and publicly accessible program documents in English or Chinese for systematic document analysis.

Geographic and Institutional Diversity: Representation of Different National Higher Education Systems and Institutional Types. The five countries of the final sample are China, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and Singapore. China has adopted a state-led model of higher education; the United States and the United Kingdom are market-driven systems, and Singapore has established a hybrid model.

Stratification by institutional hierarchy addresses the problem of elite sample bias in the sample. The first twelve universities are the “elite research-intensive” group. Given the scope and research questions of this study, this tier provides the most informative cases for examining how leading institutions conceive professional education. Elite research-intensive universities are generally at the forefront of curriculum reform and provide a reference for other institutions; thus, grasping their conceptual system has inherent value and the potential for diffusion. However, the researcher knows that the results from this sample cannot be applied directly to non-elite institutions. This defect is corrected in Section 5.4.

The result is finally:

Chinese universities (6): Sun Yat-sen University, Nankai University, Beijing International Studies University, Fudan University, Zhejiang University, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Shenzhen).

International universities (6): University of Surrey (UK), The Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Hong Kong SAR), University of Queensland (Australia), Cornell University (USA), University of South Carolina (USA), Nanyang Technological University (Singapore)

This sample has a representative proportion of Chinese and foreign programs for cross-border comparisons. A number of research institutions and colleges with relatively strong professional education are also included to expand the sample.

3.3. Data Collection

From March to May 2026, data were obtained from the official university website. The following document types were collected for each programme:

Descriptions or Missions of Undergraduate Programs

Official Learning Outcomes or Talent Training Objective Statements

Curricular Structures: Core courses, elective tracks and credit distribution.

Program Handbooks (where publicly available)

University Strategic Plans and Policy Documents on Undergraduate Education

All documents are publicly available and do not require institutional ethics approval, in line with archival document analysis guidelines for educational research. Document analysis refers to the study of policies and institutional practices in the form of official documents that express institutions’ formal objectives and values [45].

As Bowen suggests, document analysis is more appropriate for studying institutionalised educational policies and normative values to reduce the recall bias and social desirability bias in interviews [45]. Interviews may be subject to social desirability bias or self-presentation by the participants; therefore, official documents reflect the universities’ formal and institutional intentions. They have undergone a strict internal review process and are for informing the outside world about the institution’s basic values and educational objectives.

It should be noted that “official curriculum” and “implemented curriculum” are different in this study. The official curriculum refers to the formal, written curriculum as presented in programme documents, learning outcome statements and course lists. At the same time, the implemented curriculum refers to what actually occurs in the classroom, such as teaching methods, evaluation, and students’ learning experience. Only the official curriculum

is included in this study, and it reflects the institutional goals and desired learning outcomes of the programmes. Although the implemented curriculum differs from the official one in some respects, the official curriculum offers a good model for the ideas and values of education in designing the programme. The official curriculum can be used to compare systematically among all institutions and countries, as these documents are publicly available and standardised in format. The researcher believes this is a conscious choice to set a limit and will discuss this method in the limitations.

For Accuracy and completeness, the researcher independently gathered the documents for each programme. All discrepancies were addressed by discussing and confirming the original university websites. All of the documents have been downloaded and stored in a secure digital archive for research.

3.4. Data Analysis

Miles, Huberman and Saldaña's guidelines for qualitative data analysis were employed to carry out three cycles of analysis [46].

Stage 1: Within-case analysis. Each case was individually summarized in a standardised coding form that included the stated educational goals and mission statements, graduate attributes and learning outcomes, core curriculum components and credit distribution, elective or specialisation tracks, and practical training requirements such as internships. Based on the research questions and some previous studies, a code template has been developed. Two researchers independently coded the same three cases to check for intercoder reliability; it was 86%. Discussed it to solve the problem and modified the code template accordingly.

Stage 2: Cross-case Analysis. Cross-case matrices were built to compare patterns in Chinese and foreign cases. The matrices can be used to compare the distribution of credit, internship requirements and the number of specialisation tracks systematically. Find the commonalities and differences among the cases at this time.

Stage 3: Thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurrent themes and variations in the data, and the fundamental educational ideas underpinning all methods of talent cultivation and school life organisation were explored. NVivo 14 software assisted in coding and retrieval.

To improve reliability, several measures were taken: data were cross-verified from multiple sources for each case (triangulation), a group of education researchers conducted peer debriefing, and a reflective journal recorded the researcher's assumptions and possible biases during the research process [47]. The full coding tree, including exemplary quotes and the hierarchical thematic structure, is presented in **Appendix A**.

3.5. Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Chinese scholar who has been educated in both Chinese and Western educational research traditions, the researcher is aware that these two systems have shaped the course of this study. The selection of six Chinese universities and six foreign universities is intended to achieve a balanced comparison, but it also shows that the researcher is interested in connecting educational ideas in China and abroad. In analysing the documents, the researcher's previous knowledge of China's higher education policies (such as the "New Liberal Arts" initiative) may have led to increased sensitivity to national policy language in Chinese program documents and, consequently, failed to pay sufficient attention to similar policy influences in Western contexts.

Given the above biases, two colleagues from the United Kingdom and Australia participated in a systematic process of peer debriefing to revise the coding scheme and challenge any overly Chinese interpretations. At the same time, a reflective journal was maintained throughout this research to record how the researcher's own experiences in tourism management education influenced their interpretation of curriculum documents. Through reflection, I could distinguish between what the documents said and what I expected to find.

3.6. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the reliability of this qualitative research, the following steps have been taken to meet the four conditions for trustworthiness [47]:

Credibility (Internal Validity): Triangulation of data was performed by cross-referencing information from multiple types of documents (program descriptions, learning outcome statements and curriculum structures) for each case. In addition, the three researchers in comparative education regularly held peer debriefing sessions to address the new interpretations and improve the thematic analysis.

Dependability (Reliability): A full audit trail of the research process was created to record decisions made in selecting cases, coding rules, analysis notes, etc. A coding scheme was co-developed and piloted on the first three cases; the inter-coder reliability reached 86%, and any differences were resolved by consensus.

Confirmability (Objectivity): A reflective journal was used at the time of data collection and analysis to document any assumptions or preconceived notions I held. Thus, it can be seen that the results are based on the data rather than my personal wishes.

Transferability (external validity): Richly describe the institutional environment of each case, the national higher education system and curriculum details, etc. (See **Appendix B** for specific comparisons). Although the results cannot be generalised statistically, the rich context may help the reader determine how far these findings can be applied to their own institutions.

4. Findings

4.1. Convergences in Talent Training Goals

Although there are various institutions and countries, all twelve programs have the same basic objectives and conform to the world's vocational higher education trends. The above commonalities suggest that universities have generally aligned their goals for professional education, although the actual implementation differs.

First, all twelve programs focus on the development of applied abilities to prepare graduates for work. Although Chinese institutions generally refer to this as “practical skills” and foreign programmes as “industry-ready abilities”, there is a near-universal consensus that graduates need to handle and solve complex operational problems in practice effectively. The program description at Sun Yat-sen University requires graduates to “have the practical ability to solve complex problems in tourism management”, and Cornell University’s learning outcomes include the capacity to “apply business principles to hospitality operations”; both focus on applied abilities and are in line with the general trend of higher education to enhance accountability and labour-market relevance [48].

Second, all the programmes list “international perspective” or “global vision” as a required graduate quality. It is the same in all five countries; therefore, professional work around the world has become more centralised. Sun Yat-sen University wishes to “cultivate internationalised professionals who can compete in the global tourism market”, Cornell University hopes to foster “global awareness in hospitality contexts” and enable students to “work effectively in multicultural teams”, and even locally-oriented programmes recognize the need to prepare graduates for a globalised industry; this finding is consistent with research showing that many countries are gradually adding global competence requirements to various educational systems [24,25].

Third, Sustainability and Social Responsibility appear in eleven of the twelve programs’ learning objectives. Only a small-scale program will be organised to manage the events. The goal of the University of Queensland’s program is to “promote sustainable destination management practices”, and Nankai University hopes to “cultivate graduates with a strong sense of social responsibility and commitment to sustainable tourism development”. This indicates that professionals are becoming increasingly aware of the environmental and social consequences of their work and need to have such traits. Recently, research has also aligned tourism curricula with the Sustainable Development Goals and incorporated sustainability competencies into programme learning outcomes at various levels at different times [37].

4.2. Divergences in Talent Training Goals

Although there are some general convergences in the aims of vocational education, the actualisations of these aims vary considerably at the institutional level. The two main categories of the above differences are breadth versus specificity, and local embeddedness versus global standardisation.

4.2.1. Breadth versus Specificity

Most Chinese universities have presented broad, all-encompassing educational goals that focus on the all-round development of individuals. Nankai University hopes to cultivate “high-quality compound talents with a solid theoretical foundation, strong practical ability, innovative spirit and international vision”. Fudan University goes further by advocating “all-round humanistic cultivation” in addition to professional knowledge, and its program intends to “develop students’ critical thinking, cultural literacy and moral character”. These broad goals reflect the

Confucian tradition of education as moral and intellectual cultivation, as well as the Chinese government's emphasis on nurturing "well-rounded talents" capable of serving the country's development [5].

Foreign universities, such as those in the United States and the United Kingdom, also state learning outcomes in a specific way by using competencies. The University of Surrey has set out discrete and measurable skills, such as "apply financial management principles to hospitality operations", "analyse revenue data to optimise business performance", and "communicate effectively across cultural boundaries"; Cornell University's learning outcomes are also specific, including "design and implement marketing strategies for hospitality businesses" and "evaluate the legal and ethical issues facing the hospitality industry". Such an emphasis on particular competencies indicates that the instrumental view of education, which considers education a way to obtain a job, has begun to emerge in the market-oriented higher education system [49]. A systematic review of research on hotel management education has identified a persistent problem of balancing all-round development with the development of specialisation [35].

4.2.2. Local Embeddedness versus Global Standardisation

The second is that not all programmes need to be localised or standardised at the same time. Many Chinese programme descriptions focus on serving "China's tourism industry" and "national economic development". For example, Beijing International Studies University hopes to nurture graduates who are knowledgeable about China's tourism policy system and can contribute to the development of the tourism industry, and Zhejiang University aims to integrate international advanced theories with the practical demands of China's tourism development. This strong national focus is in line with the state-guided character of Chinese higher education, and universities are expected to align their programmes with national development plans [6].

International programmes, although frequently referring to the whole world, show little explicit national ties. They focus on transferable abilities for cross-border operation instead. The aims at the University of Queensland focus on "sustainable destination management" without a national standard, and the University of South Carolina seeks to "prepare graduates for careers in the global hospitality and tourism industry". Even programmes close to the local tourism industry tend to phrase their objectives in global terms due to the international character of the professional labour market. This is in line with glocalisation research; although the global standard and system have been widely spread, they are applied differently in different countries [20,22,23].

4.3. Divergences in Curriculum Structure

Different aims for talent cultivation are reflected in different structures of course materials. The three areas of difference in the results are: credit distribution, internship requirements and specialisation depth. **Table 1** shows a general comparison of the twelve programmes.

Table 1. Comparative Curriculum Structure of Twelve Universities.

University	Country/Region	Total Credits	General Education (%)	Core Major (%)	Required Internship (Weeks)	Specialization Tracks
Sun Yat-sen	China	160	30%	45%	12	2
Nankai	China	155	28%	48%	16	2
Beijing Int'l Studies	China	158	32%	42%	12	1
Fudan	China	162	35%	40%	8	2
Zhejiang	China	160	28%	47%	12	2
CUHK-Shenzhen	China	148	25%	42%	8	4
Surrey	UK	120	12%	55%	12*	7
Hong Kong PolyU	HK SAR	122	15%	50%	10*	5
Queensland	Australia	128	14%	52%	Optional	6
Cornell	USA	120	18%	45%	Optional	6
South Carolina	USA	124	16%	48%	Optional	5
NTU	Singapore	130	15%	50%	8*	4

Note: * indicates a mandatory internship.

Please be aware that the proportions are approximate and based on institutional credit requirements. "General Education" refers to breadth requirements outside the major, and "Core Major" includes required courses in the tourism/hospitality discipline. **Appendix B** shows the detailed division and graduate attributes of the elective courses.

Credit distribution: Chinese programmes allocate a relatively larger proportion of credits to general education

compared with foreign programmes. Chinese programmes usually allocate 25–35% of the total credits to general education, such as mandatory courses in political theory, foreign languages, university mathematics and physical education. The international programmes allocate only 10–20% of the credits for similar breadth requirements and focus more on free electives outside the major. Cornell University permits students to take up to 40% of their credits outside the School of Hotel Administration for minors or double majors in other areas. This difference indicates the more fundamental philosophical divergence of holistic and instrumental education.

Internship Requirements: All Chinese programmes require an internship as a graduation prerequisite, usually lasting 8–16 weeks and typically organised in the final year. These internships are generally organised by the university to offer students some practical experience in a company. Among the foreign programmes, only The Hong Kong Polytechnic University and the University of Surrey require mandatory internships; the rest are optional work-integrated learning opportunities. Cornell University promotes internships but is not mandatory; it provides other forms of practical learning, such as case studies, simulations and consulting projects. Research on hospitality internships has indicated that internships are necessary for the all-round development of students' cognitive and professional abilities, and organised internship experiences can help enhance soft skills and employability [32,50].

Specialisation depth: The international programmes offer significantly more elective specialisation paths than the Chinese programmes. The seven specialisation paths at the University of Surrey are Hotel Management, Event Management, Tourism Marketing and Sustainable Tourism. Concentrations at Cornell University include Hospitality Analytics, Real Estate and Food & Beverage Management. Chinese programs offer fewer elective courses and have more required courses in economics, management and geography. Most of the Chinese programs offer only one or two specialisation tracks, if any, and students have limited choices for customised courses of study. This difference may be due to the foreign programmes focusing more on specialisations and the relatively organised system of Chinese higher education. Research on the alignment of tourism curricula with industry demands has shown that although specialisation tracks boost immediate employability, a solid foundation in core subjects is also required for extended career adaptability [35,51].

4.4. Educational Philosophies Underlying Observed Differences

There are reasons for the different goals of talent training and curriculum structures. They reflect three basic divisions in educational philosophy around the world for professional education.

Holistic vs. Instrumental Conceptions of Education. Chinese institutions, under the influence of Confucian educational culture that advocates all-round development of morality and intellect, and the national talent development strategy for well-rounded citizens, have incorporated professional education into a broader system of humanistic and civic education [5]. The high demand for general education and theoretical foundations suggests that professional education aims to develop students' all-round intellectual abilities and moral qualities in addition to technical skills. Western market-oriented systems are generally instrumentalist in nature and aim to enable employment through education. Emphasis will be placed on particular, job-related abilities and flexible specialisation, and it is expected that the graduates will be immediately employable upon graduation.

State-guided versus Market-driven Approaches to Curriculum Governance. Many Chinese programmes have been aligned with the goals of national policies, such as the construction of "new liberal arts" in China to reform and innovate liberal arts education. Universities need to integrate the priorities of national policies into their teaching plans and are responsible for helping achieve the government's goals of cultivating talent [21]. Foreign programs are more likely to have industry advisory boards and accreditation standards, and regularly update curricula according to the demands of employers to equip graduates with relevant skills. The two systems differ in terms of institutions; Chinese universities are closer to the government and international universities are more aligned with the market economy.

Knowledge Transmission vs. Experiential Learning. The Chinese curriculum focuses on theoretical foundations and organised knowledge transmission, and many East Asian countries still employ the traditional teacher-centred model. Lectures are still the main way of teaching, and most assessments are tests of memory and knowledge recall [52]. Australia and the United States' international curricula have begun to introduce problem-based learning, student autonomy, and reflection on learning. The above programs are active-learning approaches that foster students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills through case studies, group work, simulations, etc. Most of the assessments are continuous, such as homework, class participation and projects. Kolb's theory of experien-

tial learning [53] can be used to explore the reasons for different teaching approaches and their impact on students' learning results. Recent research has found that experiential and problem-based learning are now popular in Western schools, but assessment practices have not kept up with these teaching changes [36].

Institutional Hybridity: A Third Ideal Type. CUHK-Shenzhen and NTU are institutions that do not fit neatly into the “state-guided” or “market-driven” ideal types and have been analyzed separately. These institutions operate at the intersection of various educational logics and have unique tensions and hybrid solutions. CUHK-Shenzhen integrates the American-style general education requirements with the needs for Chinese professional training to provide all-around intellectual development and achieve the goals of national talent development. Bilingual classes, foreign teachers' recruitment and dual-degree options are all ways the school meets the needs of the world and the local area. NTU also operates under Singapore's state-led higher education system and adopts an Anglo-American market-responsive curriculum model to produce a unique model of government-guided talent development and industry-aligned specialisation. This “institutional hybridity” is a third ideal type that requires further study. As shown by the above hybrid cases, although the dichotomy of “state-led” and “market-driven” is convenient for analysis, it does not cover all the empirical space. Rather, institutions can actively negotiate between competing logics to produce novel configurations combining elements of both, a phenomenon also observed in recent studies of glocalization in Sino-foreign cooperative universities [22,23].

5. Discussion

5.1. Theoretical Contributions and Extensions

This cross-case analysis adds to the existing descriptive patterns by advancing the theoretical understanding of professional higher education in three interconnected ways.

First, this study shows that the liberal-vocational and global-local tensions, which are often mentioned in the literature as abstract philosophical ideas [10,11], actually appear in various forms of curricular changes. As a result, it has not been decided whether to choose one over the other; rather, institutions have made particular curriculum decisions in areas such as credit allocation, internship structure and specialisation options. By conceiving of these debates as issues of degree rather than types, the analysis rephrases the discussion as a selection among the two educational philosophies as a negotiation for contextually appropriate balance. Both the analysis in comparative higher education research and the practical application for curriculum designers under institutional constraints can be achieved by reframing this problem. The patterns of these changes in the three dimensions of philosophical orientation, governance mechanism and pedagogical paradigm provide a richer analytical vocabulary than the traditional liberal-vocational dichotomy alone [35,49].

Second, this paper adds a third ideal type, “institutional hybridity”, and thus moves beyond the traditional dichotomy of state-guided and market-driven higher education systems [6,8]. The cases of CUHK-Shenzhen and Nanyang Technological University show that institutions at the intersection of competing educational logics do not reduce tension through compromise but actively construct coherent hybrid configurations by selectively drawing from multiple traditions. CUHK-Shenzhen adds American-style general education requirements to a curriculum that also meets the goals of Chinese national talent development, and NTU operates under Singapore's state-led governance system but uses Anglo-American models of industry-responsive specialisation. These cases empirically support glocalisation scholarship [20,22,23] by showing that the adaptation of global educational norms to local conditions can produce stable, innovative institutional forms with distinct educational logics, rather than merely hybridised compromises. This contradicts the implicit convergence thesis in many comparative higher education studies [2,17] and proposes that productive friction resulting from conflicting demands should be viewed as an institutional asset rather than a defect to be rectified.

Third, the study presents a heuristic value by taking a single professional discipline as an exemplary case to illuminate broader problems in higher education. Tourism management is relatively suitable for this purpose because the industry it serves is both one of the most internationally integrated economic sectors and one of the most culturally and ecologically place-bound fields of practice [26,27]. The two-sided character of tourism programmes requires them to address the competing demands of global employability standards and local cultural responsiveness, as well as transferable managerial competencies and destination-specific knowledge; otherwise, there will be economic efficiency versus sustainability ethics [15,16,54]. The patterns shown here, particularly

the convergence on global literacy and sustainability as shared learning goals and the persistent divergence in curricular breadth and internship structures, are unlikely to be specific to tourism. It can be inferred that cross-case designs in other professional fields may also reveal how these basic contradictions are addressed differently by different disciplines, providing cross-disciplinary learning on the fundamental goals of professional higher education in the 21st century [40,41].

5.2. Practical Implications for Curriculum Design and Governance

The three philosophical divisions identified in this study are: holistic vs. instrumental educational aims; state-guided vs. market-driven governance; and knowledge-transmission vs. experiential-learning pedagogies, which offer a diagnostic system for curriculum review and reform. These lenses translate the above abstract tensions into feasible considerations for all parties and stakeholders.

Based on the above studies, curriculum designers can learn that the structure of professional programmes carries certain philosophical values and does not solely respond to the demands of the labour market. Institutions that wish to strengthen the curriculum can begin by learning how well they perform in all three continua mentioned above, and then deliberately adjust their position according to the institution's goals and the needs of the students. For example, the strength of broad general education in Chinese programmes could be further enhanced by introducing more curricular flexibility and a wider range of specialisation paths, enabling students to choose learning paths in new industries without compromising the philosophy of all-round education [5,51]. Conversely, Western and other internationally oriented programmes may opt to strengthen their liberal arts foundations, as purely skills-based curricula risk producing graduates who are unprepared for the cognitive and ethical demands of a rapidly changing professional environment [13,55]. Research on graduate career adaptability has found that, in addition to strong disciplinary knowledge, broad intellectual abilities are also correlated with extended professional success more reliably than narrow technical skills alone [51,52].

Institutional leaders and quality assurance organisations should add more space for contextual differences in the accreditation system based on the above evidence. As shown in the hybrid cases introduced above, coordinated, high-quality professional education can be achieved under all kinds of institutional arrangements, each with its own history, governance system and cultural expectations. Rather than using a single competency system that implicitly favours Western market-oriented educational models, the accreditation organisation can set flexible standards to recognise the legitimacy of various philosophical orientations [7,40]. The problem is how to maintain high-quality standards while also accommodating the necessary differences in culture, history and institutions; therefore, the global standard-setters and local practitioners need to continue communicating.

5.3. Methodological Reflections and Future Research Directions

Several methodological problems that have occurred in this study provide a reference for future research. The study exclusively uses publicly available official documents to obtain what Goodlad referred to as the “espoused curriculum”—institutional ideals as formally expressed—rather than the curriculum as actually implemented in classrooms and experienced by students. Official documents go through internal review and are designed for external communication; therefore, they may conform to the rhetorical system of current policy discourses rather than reflecting the actual situation of teaching and learning. Therefore, the analysis may fail to show any defects in the policy-practice gap and cannot explain how individual faculty members interpret, negotiate or resist the formal learning outcome framework in their daily teaching decisions. In the future, several ways will be used to study the same problem, including syllabus analysis, classroom observation and semi-structured interviews with program directors and instructors [56]. Thus, it will be possible to construct a more complete picture that includes both institutional framing and the actual situation of curriculum implementation.

Second, although informative and suitable for the research questions, the purposeful sample only includes top-tier research-intensive universities. The curricular logic and educational philosophies of teaching-focused institutions, regional universities, community colleges and specialised vocational schools may differ significantly from those documented here. Expand the sample to include non-elite institutions at this time, and determine whether the observed pattern is due to institutional hierarchy effects or stable national system characteristics; also, explore how institutions with different positions in the national hierarchy respond to the tension between liberal-vocationalism and global-localism.

Third, the study does not contain data on students' learning outcomes or long-term graduate paths. Therefore, through empiricism, it has not been determined whether the curriculum differences mentioned above lead to different levels of ability, employment opportunities, career adaptability and civic qualities among graduates. Longitudinal cohort studies and graduate tracer studies would be very helpful in evaluating the long-term effects of different professional education models under the influence of rapid changes in the professional labour market due to technology and economics [29,39]. Such studies could also explore whether the whole-school educational philosophy of Chinese programmes is advantageous for fostering students' adaptive abilities and ethical sense, or if the more specialised mode in Western programmes is better suited to prepare graduates for immediate entry into the workforce. To answer these questions, one must demonstrate many skills, such as critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, moral judgment, and a spirit of lifelong learning; these are all the objectives of professional higher education but are difficult to evaluate.

5.4. Broader Implications and Concluding Remarks

Although there are methodological limitations, the main idea of this paper still holds: the conflict between liberal and vocational education, and the difference between globalisation and localisation, are not merely abstract philosophical issues but actual problems in curriculum design that institutions around the world are addressing. Cross-case comparison shows that no single model of vocational education is universally suitable; rather, the best programmes are those that achieve a good balance according to their own institutional and cultural circumstances. Hybrid models that integrate components from various educational cultures, such as broad general education alongside specialised professional training, or state-guided curriculum systems with market-responsive flexibility, have shown excellent results in curriculum reform in the current period of change.

With the increase in internationalisation of higher education and a more globalised professional labour market, the aim of professional programmes is no longer to choose among different educational philosophies but to combine them to equip graduates with both current and future professional capabilities in an unstable world. Based on the above analysis, it can be concluded that integration is not only required but is also being promoted in many ways already; therefore, a hopeful and diverse view of the future of professional higher education has emerged, in which various institutional forms are regarded as legitimate responses to the common challenges facing professional education around the world.

6. Conclusion

This cross-case qualitative study of twelve universities in five countries shows that although there are common goals for professional higher education—such as cultivating applied abilities, global literacy, and social responsibility—the ways in which they are articulated and achieved differ significantly. These differences are not random; they result from competing educational ideas, including a whole-child or utility-oriented concept of education, governmental or market-driven construction of curricula, and traditional theory-transmission methods versus modern problem-based teaching.

Although situated in tourism management education, this study also addresses basic problems for all professional higher education. Tensions between liberal and vocational education, and between global and local orientations, are all too familiar problems that will be exacerbated with further internationalisation of higher education. Through the lens of tourism management education, these tensions can be explored to provide a reference for how universities may address these problems and develop courses that prepare graduates for professional life and continuous learning.

Therefore, no single model of professional education is suitable for all circumstances. The best programmes are those that can meet various demands and are suitable for the institutional and cultural environment. Hybrid models combining the strengths of all sides show promise for curriculum reform. With the continuous changes in the world economy, high-quality vocational education should keep improving and adjusting to meet the new demands of students, enterprises and society.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. Only publicly available documents (official university websites and programme handbooks) were used in this study, and no human or animal subjects were included. Therefore, no institution’s ethics review was needed.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. No human subjects were included in the study.

Data Availability Statement

All the documents in this study have been made available by the official websites of the selected universities. In March and May 2026, data were collected. The coded datasets and analysis matrices will be provided by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author has no related party transactions.

AI Use Statement

During the preparation of this work, the authors used DeepSeek for language polishing. The author subsequently reviewed and edited the content as necessary and take full responsibility for the final content of the published article.

Appendix A. Coding Tree

Table A1. Simplified Coding Tree for Thematic Analysis.

Level 1: Raw Data (Exemplary Quotes)	Level 2: Concepts	Level 3: Themes	Level 4: Core Themes
“cultivate high-quality compound talents with solid theoretical foundation” (Nankai)	broad/holistic objectives	breadth vs. specificity	Holistic vs. Instrumental
“apply financial management principles to hospitality operations” (Surrey)	specific/measurable competencies	breadth vs. specificity	
“serve China’s tourism industry” (BISU)	national orientation	local embeddedness	State-guided vs. Market-driven
“prepare graduates for careers in the global hospitality industry” (South Carolina)	global orientation	global standardization	
“comprehensive humanistic cultivation” (Fudan)	moral/intellectual formation	knowledge transmission	Theory-transmission vs. Problem-based Learning
“problem-based learning, case studies” (Cornell)	active/experiential learning	experiential learning	
“New Liberal Arts construction” (policy ref)	national policy alignment	state guidance	Institutional Hybridity
“industry advisory boards” (Queensland)	market responsiveness	market responsiveness	
“American-style GE + Chinese professional training” (CUHK-Shenzhen)	hybrid logic	institutional hybridity	

Source: Based on the analysis of code from program documents in 12 universities.

Appendix B. Detailed Curriculum Comparison Table

Table A2. Comprehensive Curriculum Structure Comparison.

University	Country	Total Credits	Gen Ed (%)	Core Major (%)	Electives (%)	Required Internship (weeks)	Specialization Tracks	Key Graduate Attributes (Top 3 Keywords)
Sun Yat-sen	China	160	30%	45%	25%	12	2	practical, international, innovative
Nankai	China	155	28%	48%	24%	16	2	theoretical, practical, international
Beijing Int’l Studies	China	158	32%	42%	26%	12	1	policy-oriented, practical, international

Table A2. *Cont.*

University	Country	Total Credits	Gen Ed (%)	Core Major (%)	Electives (%)	Required Internship (weeks)	Specialization Tracks	Key Graduate Attributes (Top 3 Keywords)
Fudan	China	162	35%	40%	25%	8	2	critical thinking, humanistic, innovative
Zhejiang	China	160	28%	47%	25%	12	2	innovative, practical, international
CUHK-Shenzhen	China	148	25%	42%	33%	8	4	global, interdisciplinary, innovative
Surrey	UK	120	12%	55%	33%	12*	7	industry-ready, analytical, global
Hong Kong PolyU	HK SAR	122	15%	50%	35%	10*	5	professional, innovative, global
Queensland	Australia	128	14%	52%	34%	Optional	6	sustainable, analytical, global
Cornell	USA	120	18%	45%	37%	Optional	6	business-savvy, ethical, global
South Carolina	USA	124	16%	48%	36%	Optional	5	professional, global, innovative
NTU	Singapore	130	15%	50%	35%	8*	4	innovative, global, interdisciplinary

Note: * indicates a required internship. Percentages are close to the institutional credit limits.

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